
The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South

Author(s): Paul H. Buck

Source: *The American Historical Review*, Oct., 1925, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct., 1925), pp. 41-54

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1904501>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1904501?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Oxford University Press and American Historical Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Historical Review*

THE POOR WHITES OF THE ANTE-BELLUM SOUTH

I.

THOUGH life in the old South was in many respects complex, yet fundamentally a "peculiar institution" dominated the domestic, industrial, and political activity of all classes. It was apparent that a peaceful continuance of the controlling influence of slavery could last only as long as there existed a common belief among non-slaveholders that their relation to a system of slave labor rested upon a basis of mutual advantage. The dominant race had been held together by a class consciousness which seemed more vital than the differences which separated it into groups of slaveholders, yeomen farmers, artisans, and poor whites. Towards the close of the antebellum period, however, obvious defects of an undiversified economy caused a re-examination of industrial society, and in the process the antagonisms latent in the relations of the various elements of the white population came to the surface. As a consequence there took shape a movement of discontent which promised to wrest political leadership from the hands of the gentry and overthrow the industrial monopoly of the plantation system.

It remained for Hinton Rowan Helper to express this "impending crisis" in its extreme form.¹ He declared that an ineradicable class antagonism separated those who owned slaves from those who owned none. Describing himself as one of the non-slaveholders he urged his fellow-sufferers to rise in revolt, cast off the yoke of the "planting oligarchy", and govern according to their own class interests.² Helper's appeal met with no response among the non-slaveholders. Many of them were illiterate, and the book had only a limited circulation in the South. Yet this obvious explanation should not obscure the fact that Helper was proceeding on a false assumption. Moderate reformers, men like De Bow, William Gregg, and Governor Hammond, had long been studying the problem of Southern industry. From their experience one is impressed with the belief that instead of a clear-cut issue between the slaveholders and non-slaveholders, the latter group itself rested on a congeries of complex interests which prevented the development of a class consciousness that could be directed against the institution of slavery.

¹ H. R. Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South* (New York, 1857).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 32, 120-121, 155 ff.

It is necessary to view the non-slaveholding element in the light of its complex composition. The province of this paper is the life, attitude, and social significance of the most wretched portion of the population. The poor whites of the ante-bellum South were at the very bottom of society. Yet their presence went far in affecting the course of Southern history in the period before the Civil War, as their regeneration since then has been a characteristic feature of the rise of a New South.

II.

The South contained a number of areas which stood out in significant isolation as the habitat of the poor whites. In Georgia such a district was found in the pine barrens of the south-central portion of the state whose insularity was accentuated by a tier of black-belt counties which surrounded it. In the amount of cotton and corn produced, property in live stock, and cash value of farms, the poor white counties were far outstripped by their more fortunate neighbors.³ The region of the pine barrens was also completely detached from the centres where manufactures either had been established or were beginning.⁴ Mississippi, likewise, had a well-defined poor white area. East of the Pearl River a barren section of pine woods formed a distinct portion of the state known as East Mississippi, the home of the "hill-billies", "sand-hillers", and "clay-eaters". In the western portion of the state, on the fertile bottom-lands of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, the plantation system had been established in an advanced form. Between these two districts there was great disparity in the per capita distribution of wealth, the average white of the black belt exceeding in wealth the average inhabitant of East Mississippi by ten to fifteen times.⁵ Similarly in South Carolina, Alabama, and Florida, "sand-hillers" and "clay-eaters" were to be found living in clusters through the pine woods, the abandoned clay bottoms, and the unproductive sand-hills.

Scattered through these barrens the poor whites lived in isolated communities remote from centres of trade and untouched by the normal currents of Southern life.⁶ Infrequently traversed roads might with difficulty be traced through the wild, sparsely settled

³ *Census of 1860, Agriculture*, pp. 26-28.

⁴ In no poor white county except Charlton, where 184 hands were employed in the turpentine industry, did the census reports indicate more than 50 hands employed in manufactures. *Census of 1860, Manufactures*, pp. 61-79, 80-81, 82.

⁵ Comparison based on statistics gathered from the *Census of 1860*.

⁶ D. R. Hundley, *Social Relations in our Southern States* (New York, 1860), p. 258. Hundley was a Southerner of the planting class.

country, but these paths were "almost overgrown with grass, and so dim and blind that the traveller almost unconsciously wanders from them into the forest".⁷ The land was of slight value, and its lack of fertility made agriculture a doubtful venture. Consequently the land was in no demand from productive society, and the poor white had no difficulty in finding a small tract upon which he could live unmolested.⁸

Here he would build a rude cabin of round logs in the typical backwoods manner. "A few rickety chairs, a long bench, a dirty bed or two, a spinning-wheel, . . . a skillet, an oven, a frying-pan, a triangular cupboard in one corner and a rack . . . [for] the family rifle"⁹ might serve as an inventory of the contents of the cabin's single room. Food could be procured with a minimum of effort. "Wild hogs, deer, wild turkeys, squirrels, raccoons, opossums—these and many more are at [the] very doors [of the poor whites]; and they have only to pick up 'old Silver Heels' [the rifle], walk a few miles out into the forest, and return home laden with enough meat to last them a week."¹⁰ The yield of their rifles and fishing rods might be supplemented by corn and potatoes from their straggling gardens.¹¹ Altogether it was a life without much effort and it produced a class of lazy, idle men who gained a universal reputation for shiftlessness.¹²

As a rule the poor whites were illiterate and ignorant.¹³ The undeveloped educational system of the South did not extend into the

⁷ Augusta *Constitutionalist*, Oct. 18, 1831, as quoted in U. B. Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier*, II. 167 (*Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Cleveland, 1910). Cf. Olmsted's experience, F. L. Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York, 1856), pp. 63 ff.

⁸ Squatting was common among the poor white class. Hundley, *Social Relations*, pp. 119, 271; G. Weston, *The Progress of Slavery in the United States* (Washington, 1857), p. 39.

⁹ Hundley, *Social Relations*, p. 260.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262.

¹¹ James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), p. 224; Hundley, *Social Relations*, p. 261.

¹² Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, pp. 506–508; Cairnes, *Slave Power*, p. 369; *De Bow's Review*, XVII. 363; Hundley describes the poor whites as "the laziest two-legged animals that walk erect on the face of the earth. Even their motions are slow, and their speech is a sickening drawl . . . while their thoughts and ideas seem likewise to creep along at a snail's pace. All they seem to care for is to live from hand to mouth; to get drunk, . . .; to shoot for beef; to attend gander pullings; to vote at elections; to eat and sleep; to lounge in the sunshine of a bright summer's day, and to bask in the warmth of a roaring wood fire, when summer days are over". *Social Relations*, pp. 263–264.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

remote districts where they made their homes,¹⁴ while their own inertia formed an effective barrier to the extension of reform.¹⁵ The ignorance of the class had far-reaching results, giving birth to prejudices which made it easy to acquiesce in slavery at a time when others were pointing to that institution as the cause of the poor whites' degeneracy.¹⁶ It is not certain that education would have altered greatly the situation. Gilmore, reflecting the opinion of most Northern and European travellers, stated that destruction of slavery would follow inevitably the education of the poor whites.¹⁷ On the other hand, Fitzhugh averred that if the poor man were educated and given "respectable employment" (*i.e.*, work artificially closed to slaves by law) he would become "a noble and privileged character and he would then like the negroes and slavery because his high position would be due to them".¹⁸ The foreign observer was apt to be blind to the social and economic relations existing between the poor white and the slave, and the importance to the former of maintaining the system of slavery to safeguard his own self-respect. If education were to bring power it is logical to assume that such power might be employed in asserting a superiority that had little basis of fact once slavery was abolished and artificial restraints swept aside.

Perhaps the most regrettable habit of the poor white was that of eating clay. How prevalent this disease was it is impossible to ascertain. Lyell, the English scientist, believed it to be common among the poor whites of the lower South.¹⁹ Occasional references to the "dirt-eaters" and "clay-eaters" are found in scattered sources. As illustrative of this sort of evidence a conversation between a Northern traveller and his negro guide may be quoted:

"Are there many of these poor whites around Georgetown [S. C.]?"

"Not many 'round Georgetown, sar, but great many in de up-country har, and dey'm all 'like—pore and no account; none ob 'em kin read, and dey all eat clay."

"Eat clay!" I said; "What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't you see, massa, how yaller all dem wimmin war? Dat's 'cause dey eat clay. De little children begin 'fore dey kin walk, and dey

¹⁴ De Bow, *Resources of the Southern and Western States* (New Orleans, 1852-1853), I. 71, 246; Olmsted, *Back Country*, pp. 25, 40, 331-337; Helper, *Impending Crisis*, p. 288.

¹⁵ Cairnes, *Slave Power*, p. 153, note, quoting William Gregg.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144; Weston, *Progress of Slavery*, pp. 39-48, 203-204.

¹⁷ Gilmore, *Among the Pines*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁸ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, p. 148.

¹⁹ Charles Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States of North America* (New York and London, 1849), II. 17.

eat it till dey die; dey chaw it like 'backer. It makes all dar stumacs big, like as you seed 'em, and spiles dar 'gestion. It'm mighty onhealfy." ²⁰

Years after the period of this study dirt-eating, the anemic, milky complexions, and the stupid, lazy attitude of the poor whites were discovered to be symptoms of chronic suffering from the hookworm disease (uncinariasis). In 1902 Dr. Charles Wardell Stiles succeeded in demonstrating the prevalence of the malady in the rural, sandy districts of the South, the areas in which the poor whites had been living for generations.²¹ This "poor man's malady", the most common illness of the infected districts, was the true cause of "much of the trouble popularly attributed to 'dirt-eating', 'resin-chewing', and even some of the proverbial laziness of the poorer classes of the white population".²²

One has only to compare the description of the ante-bellum poor white with Dr. Stiles's symptoms of hookworm disease to realize that the people living on the same ground in the years before 1860 were suffering from the same trouble as their descendants in 1902. Henry Ker in 1816 when speaking of complexions that were of "a yellow sickly cast" ²³ was describing the same phenomena that Stiles pictured as "anemic, waxy-white to a yellow or tan, shrivelled, parchement-like or tallow appearance".²⁴ The sand-hiller—"lank, lean, angular, and bony, with flaming red, or flaxen, or sandy, or carrot-colored hair, sallow complexion, awkward manners, and a natural stupidity or dullness of intellect that almost surpasses belief"—who crossed Hundley's pages,²⁵ was of the same species as the thin, pot-bellied figures with drawn faces who recently stepped up to the field dispensaries of the Rockefeller Foundation to be cured of uncinariasis.²⁶ Gilmore's "dirt-eaters" ²⁷ were satisfying "an abnormal appetite due to the anemia and abnormal condition of the intestinal tract",²⁸ which marks the advanced stages of chronic hookworm disease. If then we are to conclude that to some extent at least the

²⁰ Gilmore, *Among the Pines*, p. 82.

²¹ C. W. Stiles, *Report upon the Prevalence and Geographic Distribution of Hookworm Disease in the United States* [Treasury Dept. Hygienic Laboratory, Bulletin no. 10] (Washington, 1903).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²³ Henry Ker, *Travels through the Western Interior of the United States* (Elizabethtown, N. J., 1816), p. 352.

²⁴ Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁵ Hundley, *Social Relations*, pp. 264-265.

²⁶ Rockefeller Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease, *Publications* (Washington, 1910-1915).

²⁷ Gilmore, *Among the Pines*, p. 82.

²⁸ Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

ante-bellum poor whites were suffering from a disease which weakened them in mind and body, we must be ready to modify the extreme statements of contemporaries who condemned these "degenerates, the children of ancient poverty and wrong",²⁹ as personally accountable for their destitution.³⁰

The poverty, ignorance, and shiftless outlook on life characteristic of the class are the outgrowth of an environment of barren soils and isolated stagnation. The road to the true frontier, towards progress and independence, was barred by the plantation belt which enclosed many of the poor white areas. An inert contentment with their lot had also developed in a group long accustomed to fill no place in productive society. This will become evident after an examination of the relation of the poor whites to the Southern industrial organization.

III.

The poor white class was the slum element of the South. This fact the South never fully accepted. The harsh condemnation of Northern and European critics that it constituted a rotten core in Southern society was passed over as foreign prejudice and had little effect upon Southern thought.³¹ Several factors contributed in producing the complacency with which the typical Southerner viewed the presence of the poor white class. The absence of continued contact between the responsible elements of society and the poor whites, coupled with the total lack of discontent on the part of the latter, which, if present, might have compelled consideration of the problem, made for ignorance and neglect of its existence. Southern society considered itself exceptionally favored with a remarkably small pauper class and failed to see suffering as striking as that which fell

²⁹ Ingle, *Southern Sidelights*, p. 24.

³⁰ See the next note.

³¹ Frances A. (Kemble) Butler wrote that the poor white class was "the most degraded race of human beings claiming an Anglo-Saxon origin that can be found on the face of the earth—filthy, lazy, ignorant, brutal, proud, penniless savages without one of the nobler attributes which have been found occasionally allied to the vices of savage nature". *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, in 1838-1839* (New York, 1863), p. 146. Olmsted approximates this in *The Cotton Kingdom*, I. 13, 83. This group of critics exaggerated, no doubt, but the contempt of Southern planters frequently led to equally harsh condemnation. Thus Hundley was puzzled to "comprehend for what purpose the miserable wretches were ever allowed to obtain a footing in this country". *Social Relations*, pp. 265-266. The foreigner tended to hold the system responsible for the degradation of the class while the Southerner attributed it to individual failures.

to the lot of the working-classes of the North and of England.³² Neither suffering nor poor relief, however, was the criterion by which the poverty of the South was to be appraised. It had its own peculiarities, and these were the product of the organization of industrial society. The plantation system by virtually monopolizing industry rendered superfluous the potential labor contribution of the poor white, consigning him to a life of uselessness so far as productive society was concerned. Economically the class was not directly exploited by others, but its unutilized capacities presented a serious indictment.

The planter justified his neglect by declaring the poor whites irresponsible, lazy, and dishonest, attributes rendering them valueless as laborers. Hundley expressed this point of view when he declared that "there is no longer any possible method by which they can be weaned from leading the lives of vagrom-men, idlers, and squatters, useless to themselves and the rest of mankind".³³ This contempt of their capacities was shared by the middle classes and the slaves. A "Charleston working man" flatteringly bestowed upon "the whiskey-drinking, potatoe-raising, charcoal burning Sand-hillers . . . intellect enough for the delightful employment of hammering granite", and thus, he believed, they could be induced to do the state some service.³⁴ A Northern critic, holding the thesis that free labor would ultimately supplant slave labor in the South, was convinced that the free labor would have to be imported from free communities. He had no expectation of the poor whites accomplishing this end. As a class they "were shiftless, ignorant, and degraded" to such an extent that they would be no match for the slaveholder.³⁵ The poor whites met on all sides an overwhelming distrust of their capacities,³⁶ the defense reaction of a society in which they, as a productive factor, were superfluous.

Prejudice was an additional consideration preventing the employment of the class in the plantation system. The planter had

a natural distaste to exchange absolute for partial authority over the instruments by which he achieves his purpose; and the employment of free

³² Hundley, *Social Relations*, p. 261; Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, pp. 27-28; *id.*, *Cannibals All*, *passim*.

³³ Hundley, *Social Relations*, p. 119; see also Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, pp. 82-83.

³⁴ *De Bow's Review*, IX. 435 (October, 1850). The negro despised the poor whites as "pore trash. Dat's what de big folks call 'em, and it am true; dey'm long way lower down dan de darkies". Gilmore, *Among the Pines*, p. 83.

³⁵ Weston, *Progress of Slavery*, p. 18. Cairnes shared this view; *The Slave Power*, p. 141.

³⁶ Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, I. 11-12, 83, 92-97, 189, 196.

and slave labour together, is almost as difficult as working, under the same yoke, an unbroken horse and a docile ox. Again, however repugnant it may be to the self-esteem, and contrary to the habits of the rich man to treat his labourers with respect, he has to do it when employing white men, from motives of self-interest which lie below the surface, and he consequently habitually avoids arranging his affairs in such a way as will make it necessary for him to offer them employment.³⁷

Because they might leave their jobs at any time³⁸ and because it was impossible to drive them,³⁹ white laborers were not as desirable on the plantation as slaves. Those poor whites remaining in the plantation areas were the cause of much worry to the planter. He considered their presence as demoralizing to the slaves,⁴⁰ charged them with stealing from the plantation and supplying the negroes with whiskey.⁴¹ Consequently the planter often felt it necessary to encourage the poor whites to seek homes elsewhere.⁴²

It was virtually the unanimous opinion of men from without the South and of many within that labor was considered disreputable because it was performed by slaves. From this premise it was reasoned that the poor white, sharing the disdain for labor, refused to work unless compelled to do so from necessity. "To work industriously . . .", wrote Olmsted, "is, in the Southern tongue, to 'work like a nigger'; and, from childhood, the one thing in their condition which has made life valuable to the mass of whites has been that the niggers are yet their inferiors."⁴³ Tocqueville⁴⁴ and Cairnes⁴⁵ repeated the observation, while some Southerners spoke of making labor "respectable" by a classification which would restrict the employment of negroes to "such callings as are unbecoming to white men", permitting the whites alone to engage in the professions, mechanic arts, and commerce.⁴⁶ From different motives, but to the same end, were the protests of white mechanics and masons against employing negroes in the trades.⁴⁷

The existence of the prejudice against engaging in labor disgraced by slavery, however, can easily be overstated and its effect upon the idleness of the poor white class exaggerated. More frequently the

³⁷ Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, pp. 22-23.

³⁸ Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier*, II. 183; Lyell, *Second Visit*, II. 126.

³⁹ Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, p. 84.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, *Cotton Kingdom*, I. 330-331.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I. 83, 109.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I. 331.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I. 22.

⁴⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II. 223.

⁴⁵ Cairnes, *The Slave Power*, p. 77.

⁴⁶ Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier*, II. 360-361, 364, 367.

prejudice was used as an extenuation for idleness caused by other factors.⁴⁸ Southern society as it was organized before the Civil War provided no position that the poor white could fill that was not already being satisfactorily filled by others. Consequently no pressure of public opinion arising from the need of realizing his potentialities stimulated him to abandon his easy, stagnant mode of living. The planter, satisfied with the plantation system, defending it ardently as the crisis approached, unwilling to initiate a diversification of industry, contemptuous of the poor white's capacities, was not concerned in the existence of a lower class that was unobtrusive and contented, whose chief sins were idleness and shiftlessness. And the poor white, simple in mind and attitude, was content to bask in the sunlight of indifference.⁴⁹

IV.

The possibility that the poor whites might improve their position by engaging in profitable employment in manufactures was scarcely more than an academic question before 1860. There had long existed an antipathy in the South toward manufactures that was only beginning to give way before the plea for diversification as a factor in the development of Southern nationalism. In the cotton states the advocacy of manufactures "was looked upon locally as more or

⁴⁸ Hundley pointed to the fact that the supposedly universal prejudice did not affect the yeoman farmers. They not only worked their own farms but when prosperous enough to own a slave or two were even to be found laboring side by side at the same tasks with their human chattels. *Social Relations*, pp. 195-196. In another place after maintaining that the labor of the mechanic was respected in the South he declared, "It is respectable to labor—to acquire an honest livelihood by one's own industry—all the world over; but where, we should like to know, is it considered genteel or fashionable?" *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121. The yeoman farmers and the mechanics of the South were important elements in Southern industry and were consequently more respected. The poor whites alone were the outcasts.

⁴⁹ As Southern economists began to see the necessity of diversification there was some consideration of making the poor white class a productive factor by utilizing its labor. Consequently an embryonic public opinion was shaping which, had it continued to develop in the ante-bellum period, might have created the force which would have drawn the poor whites into industrial society. As it was, however, no opportunity was presented to the group as a class of leaving their isolation. Governor Hammond of South Carolina remarked that such labor as the poor whites could find was not remunerative enough to occupy them. Helper, *Impending Crisis*, p. 165. De Bow believed that a demand for the labor of the class would raise it from want and beggary. *Resources*, I. 241. One contributor to the work just cited wrote that "the acquisition of . . . wealth appeared so difficult [to the poor whites] that they decline the hopeless pursuit, and many . . . become the almost passive subjects of all its consequences". *Ibid.*, II. 108.

less treasonable in that it implied some slight belief in tariff and the rightfulness of protection".⁵⁰ Towards the end of the ante-bellum period, however, a tendency towards diversification of industry was evident and much was said of the possibility of manufactures in the South.⁵¹ In spite of the propaganda carried on by the press and commercial conventions, Southern manufactures remained insignificant to the close of the period.⁵² As late as 1860, William Gregg saw little progress and was still endeavoring "to show that all the failures of manufacturing establishments in the South have been mainly the result of the absence of Southern patronage".⁵³ To the end the South remained but little interested in any organization of industry except the slave plantation system.

The revolution in industry came after the Civil War, and consequently the poor white was not affected in the period of this study. There were, however, isolated experiments some of which affected small groups of poor whites and suggested the ultimate regeneration of the class. One of these experiments was begun in 1833 in the pine woods north of Montgomery, Alabama, by Daniel Pratt, a native of the North. Factories for the manufacture of cotton gins and cotton goods were constructed, the business flourished, and a thriving town, Prattsville, developed. The employees were white people—men, women, and children, from the surrounding country. The homes of the operatives were furnished by the company at a small rent, and schools and churches were constructed for their use. The total population amounted to eight hundred, one-fourth of whom were engaged in the factories. The poor whites were brought together in a compact community for self-improvement. The result was that the narrowness and unprogressiveness, as well as the poverty, of their former position tended to disappear. Socially their previously utter insignificance gave way to useful employment.⁵⁴

William Gregg operated several cotton factories, the one at Graniteville, South Carolina, having the reputation of being the finest and probably the largest in the South.⁵⁵ He had marked con-

⁵⁰ Channing, *History of the United States*, V. 76.

⁵¹ The movement can be traced especially in *De Bow's Review*.

⁵² The Southern cotton factories in 1860 had 290,000 spindles, as compared with 5,236,000 for the United States. Clark, *History of Manufactures*, p. 558. The proportion of the Southern population engaged in manufacturing was 1 to 82, as compared with 1 to 8 in New England, 1 to 15 in the Middle states, and 1 to 48 in the Western states. *Ibid.*, p. 580.

⁵³ *De Bow's Review*, XXIX. 77 (July, 1860).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XI. 102 (July, 1851); *ibid.*, IV. 136 (September, 1847).

⁵⁵ Clark, *History of Manufactures*, pp. 556-557.

victions concerning the poor white class in its relation to industry. He attributed its destitution to the organization of industry which deprived the poor white of a means of livelihood. "My experience at Graniteville", he wrote, "has satisfied me, that unless our poor people can be brought together in villages, and some means of employment afforded them, it will be an utterly hopeless effort to undertake to educate them."⁵⁶ He argued for the investment of a portion of Southern capital in a type of industry that would give employment to the poor whites, thus providing them responsible positions in society. His factory was organized on this basis and from his experience one concludes that ignorance, shiftlessness, and contentment with poverty were not inherent qualities of the poor white class but the results of a meaningless existence. Gregg himself was confident that employment would raise the poor white to a position of intelligence, thrift, and usefulness.⁵⁷

V.

The rôle of the poor white in Southern politics was definitely circumscribed by characteristics of his environment and position. His geographic, social, and economic segregation from the remainder of society was a factor of primary significance in affecting his exercise of the suffrage. The isolation in such areas as East Mississippi and the Georgian pine woods gave the class an element of compactness and cohesion the attainment of which by other means was prevented by ignorance, lack of leadership, and inertia. In much the same manner the social and economic ostracism of the class suggested a class interest that was at times kindled by the harangues on democracy by the backwoods demagogue.

The prejudices of the poor white were expressed first in terms of the slave and then in terms of democracy. The economic barrier between the poor white and the negro was weak and only artificially maintained, so that from it sprang a rational self-interest in the poor

⁵⁶ *De Bow's Review*, XI. 135-136 (August, 1851).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, XXI. 624 (November, 1860); *ibid.*, VII. 356-357 (November, 1849). A natural development in Alabama tends to reinforce this conclusion. In the 'fifties the pine forests of central Alabama, heretofore untouched commercially, were exploited for turpentine. "The same pine wood heretofore inhabited by a population distinguished alone for their ignorance and poverty, living almost entirely by the rifle, may now be seen bearing an industrious, well-fed and well-clad people, adding not only to their own comfort by their labor, but elevating themselves into a sober, moral, and intelligent class of citizens, contributing in no small degree to the strength and wealth of the State." Mr. Prince's report to the Mobile convention of 1854, as quoted in *De Bow's Review*, XVIII. 189 (February, 1855).

white, expressed in a strong personal hatred for the negro and a firm conviction that slavery was essential. Hundley and Olmsted, Stirling and De Bow, Helper and Fitzhugh had this at least in common; they all recognized the strength and depth of the poor white's attachment to slavery.⁵⁸ His racial prejudices limited the extent to which he would follow in attacking the social order.⁵⁹ Fundamentally his actions would be guided by an interest to preserve the institution of slavery and, whereas the wealthy planter would endeavor to keep the issue out of politics and let things slumber, the politician who sought the votes of the poor white class would be keen to urge violent resistance to the enemies of slavery, to flatter the poor white by condemning the slave.⁶⁰

The democratic prejudices of the poor white areas were similar to those of the backwoods generally and the methods used by the astute American politician are to be found in the history, past or present, of any American city or countryside. Franklin E. Plummer found in the poor whites of East Mississippi a fertile field for his resourceful enterprise. On one of his contests he and a competitor, Judge Cage, agreed to canvass the pine woods together. At one place they stopped at a cabin for dinner. The judge immediately ingratiated himself with the mother by kissing the little girl. But when the astonished parent saw the redoubtable Plummer pick up her "wee toddling boy, lay it gently across his lap, turn over its

⁵⁸ "The poorest and humblest freeman of the South feels as sensibly, perhaps more sensibly than the wealthiest planter, the barrier which nature, as well as law, has erected between the white and black races, and would scorn as much to submit to the universal degradation which must follow, whenever it is broken down." De Bow, *Resources*, III. 35. See also Hundley, *Social Relations*, p. 274; Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, pp. 42-43; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, II. 110-111; Stirling, *Letters*, p. 86; Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All*, p. 320.

⁵⁹ At times the poor white might vaguely ponder over the effect of slavery on his life. He seldom, however, went beyond expressing a wish that things were different and ended with a sense of helplessness to alter conditions. "I wish there warn't no niggers here", he would say. "They are a great cuss to this country, I expect. But 'twouldn't do to free 'em; that wouldn't do nohow." Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, II. 110. "I'd like it if we could get rid on 'em to yonst", another would remark. "I wouldn't like to hev 'em freed, if they was gwine to hang 'round. . . . Now suppose they was free, you see they'd all think themselves just as good as we." *Ibid.*, I. 289.

⁶⁰ Consequently the poor white districts were chiefly democratic, a fact which amused Hundley (*Social Relations*, pp. 265-266), and irritated Helper (*Impending Crisis*, p. 172). The adherence of the poor white areas to the "fire-eating" party is shown in an examination of the political maps in A. C. Cole, *Whig Party in the South*, and in Phillips, *State Rights in Georgia*.

little petticoat, and go to hunting red bugs . . . she was enchanted, and never forgot that tender hearted Congressman".⁶¹

But Plummer's genius for getting votes was capable of far greater flights. He knew exactly how to play upon the emotions of his constituents. One day, Powhatan Ellis, United States senator and minister to Mexico, a Democrat but aristocratic in appearance and habits, invaded Plummer's bailiwick. In crossing a creek Ellis lost his portmanteau. Immediately Plummer saw an opportunity of crushing a rival and published the following advertisement in the Monticello paper. "Lost by Hon. Powhattan Ellis, in crossing Tallahala: 6 lawn handkerchiefs; 6 cambric shirts; 2 night do.; 1 night-cap; 1 pr. stays; 4 pr. silk stockings; hair brush, flesh-brush, nail-brush, clothes-brush, razors, and dressing-glass, pomatum, perfume, etc., etc."⁶² Commenting on this a Mississippi historian states, "That advertisement killed the Judge east of the Pearl river; such a sample of 'swelled head' effeminacy and Natchez dandyism was not wanted in the piney woods."⁶³ Plummer's cry of "Plummer for the people, the people for Plummer", his invective, and blunt ridicule of the aristocracy kept East Mississippi solidly behind him. He succeeded in constructing a strong and compact machine which kept him in office and enabled him to exert much influence in state politics.⁶⁴

Instances of similar nature were to be found elsewhere. One politician confessed to an English traveller that although he possessed a horse he always travelled on foot through the pine woods to impress the poor whites with his democratic deportment.⁶⁵ A representative to the Alabama legislature from a poor white district was defeated in seeking re-election because his ambitious daughter had worn a dress with flounces according to the latest Parisian fashion, whence arose the report that she was holding herself above the pine-woods constituency.⁶⁶ In conversing with a Southern congressman representing a poor white district Hundley was informed that "in those Congressional districts in which they [the poor whites] mostly abound . . . no person who is temperate and lives cleanly, and like a gentleman, and who will not therefore condescend to drink and hurrah with every Tom, Dick, and Harry, need ever hope for politi-

⁶¹ J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State* (Jackson, Miss., 1880), I. 425.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 426.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 425, 427.

⁶⁵ Lyell, *Second Visit*, II. 70.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

cal preferment. . . . He [the congressman] said, that, in certain parts of his district, 'the red-eye' was passed around in an old tin coffee-pot, and every man helped himself".⁶⁷ Hundley assures us that the color of the congressman's nose eloquently confirmed his remarks.

The prejudices and peculiarities of the poor white class were thus artfully made both to strengthen political machines and to bolster up the institution of slavery. This in itself presents no peculiar indictment of Southern society. The utilization of an illiterate electorate for personal political power was an outgrowth of the application of popular democracy typical of the country in general. Nor can one believe that the poor whites were being politically exploited. In their radical attachment to the institution of slavery they were expressing a groping class-consciousness based upon instinctive self-interest. To their undisciplined minds the possible emancipation of the despised negro presented social and economic dangers far greater than the continued superiority of the planter class. The individuality of the class was expressed by the barrier between themselves and the negro. Democracy made it possible for the poor whites to vote not as seemed wise to outsiders, but according to the complexes of their own psychology.

PAUL H. BUCK.

⁶⁷ Hundley, *Social Relations*, p. 269.